

Aging boomers head back to college towns

■ Academic, cultural and athletic offerings on campus mesh with their active lifestyles.

By Francis X. Donnelly
The Detroit News

ANN ARBOR — For a retirement community, University Commons doesn't seem to have a lot of people who are retired.

They're searching dusty archives of libraries, taking courses like "Utopia & Terror in the 20th Century," or making things in weekly needlework or monthly flower-arranging classes.

There's not a canasta game in sight.

As more Americans enter their golden years, they're changing the concept of retirement by choosing lifestyles that are more active than past generations', sociologists say.

As part of that activity, some are moving back to their college towns and living at places like University Commons, one of 25 college-affiliated retirement communities that have opened in the nation in the last decade. Another 25 are being developed.

"I've always been interested in being active," said Anne Rowe, 78, a Commons resident who recently returned to Ann Arbor after 30 years. "I'm not interested in everything here, but it's hard not to get involved in some of it."

With its cold, snowy winters, Michigan loses more retirees than it attracts, according to census data. Yet University Commons in Ann Arbor quickly fil-



Joyce Crane, seated, hangs out with Leon and Marcia Friedman during an alumni gathering at the Commons. "I couldn't begin to tell you all the number of programs here," Crane says.

led its 92 units after opening in 2001.

Residents said they were lured by the youthful feel of the town, which is the home of the University of Michigan. They also like to use the school's aca-

demic, cultural and athletic facilities.

College-sponsored retirement havens will continue to proliferate as baby boomers finish their careers, predicted Leon Pastalan, a retired U-M architec-

ture professor who has written a book on the burgeoning movement. The number of retirees will double from 35 million to 70 million by 2030.

Please see *RETIRE*, Page 2A



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Chuck Kelly and assistant Nicole Wiley work on research at University Commons. He returned to Ann Arbor after 36 years.

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RETIRE

Continued from Page 1A

"How can we capture the energies and skills and creativity of the older adult group?" Pastalan asked. "The best place to do it is the schools."

The retirement communities are involved with the colleges in various ways. The schools sometimes provide funding, sponsorship, marketing, professors or expertise. At U-M, the college helped find a site for University Commons.

The schools that host such communities range from large ones like the University of Florida to small ones like Lasell College in Newton, Mass. In Michigan, Hillsdale College south of Jackson is studying the possibility of hosting such a community.

For alumni, the chance to retire near their alma mater promises a return to one of the happier periods of their lives, a time when dreams were boundless.

These perpetual seniors said they enjoy the best parts of living in a college town. Free from worrying about surprise quizzes or final exams, they take classes not to get a degree but because they want to.

Of course, homecomings a half-century in the making take some adjustment. The Class of 2005 looks nothing like the Class of 1955.

Ann Arbor also has changed, the retirees said. Gone is Drake's Sandwich Shop with its pecan rolls — twice cooked — and cucumber sandwiches on buttered white bread. Taking its place are shops like the Safe Sex Store.

College feel, at a price

University Commons sits on a wooded hill just off U-M's North Campus. The identical red-brick buildings have a college feel.

So do the residents. Imagine a dormitory of professors, which, in fact, many of the residents once were.

But these condos are a bit pricey for students. They range from \$285,000 for 1,300 square feet with two bedrooms and two baths to \$700,000 for 3,000 square feet, four bedrooms and 2 1/2 baths.

They're open to past and present U-M alumni, staff and professors who are 55 or older, according to the facility's cov-



Steve Perez / The Detroit News

Retired U-M law professor John Reed talks to former students Mark Johnson, left, and Jamison Brown following a lecture on architecture at the college-sponsored Commons.



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enants.

The main building has a lecture hall, classrooms, library, woodworking shop, crafts room, fitness center, lounge, dining room and kitchen.

"I knew I was always going to be on a steep learning curve, and that the programs would be there for me on a silver platter," said resident Chuck Kelly, 63, a U-M graduate who returned to Ann Arbor after 36 years.

Because most residents live in the wings of the main building, all they have to do is walk down a hallway or stairs to participate in activities.

Among them: lectures, courses, concerts, movies, dinners and a weekly social hour. This being a college town, museums, theaters and other cultural events are just 10 minutes away.

"So many retirement facilities have token activities without much substance," said resident Joyce Crane, 72, a U-M School of Nursing instructor who left Ann Arbor in 1981. "I couldn't begin to tell you all the number of programs here."

The continuing-education courses, which run between six and 10 weeks, cover a wide

variety of topics: Japanese history, digital photography, people of the Arctic, beginning poetry, Islam, chamber music, the occupation of Iraq, computers, intro to opera.

U-M professors visit several times a week to give lectures.

To relax, the retired but not retiring residents said they attend recitals performed at the Commons' lecture hall. They're given by students of the U-M School of Music as part of earning a degree.

Even the concerts sound smart. A recent recital offered "Soliloquies for Solo B Flat Clarinet" and Trio in A minor (Op. 114) for piano, clarinet and cello.

Island of elderly

University Commons is a tiny island of elderly in an ocean of youth. The 120 residents share a city with 39,000 students.

It's a curious mix of two groups at the opposite ends of their careers.

The retirees said they feel lost among the backpack-wearing students in ripped jeans and ball caps, walking across the Diag, sipping lattes while chattering into cell phones or listening to iPods.

But the generational conflict common in some university neighborhoods is kept to a minimum by the location of the retirement community.

Surrounded by acres of woods, residents are free from the noise of late-night parties and other college shenanigans.

The Commons will never be confused with one of those boisterous U-M dorms.

The administrative building, whose hallways have handrails, has a wellness center once staffed by gerontology experts.

The continuing-education classes, which are offered by the Learning-in-Retirement Institute, offer hearing aids to students. One of the courses: "My Grand Finale: Important Considerations in Planning One's Funeral."

In returning to Ann Arbor, retirees discover a world quite different from the one they left. Both Town and Gown have grown up.

While some retirees were still students in the late '50s, the city and university began to grow and have doubled in size and population. The farmland has given way to vegetarian sandwich shops and imported art dealers.

Formerly one-way streets now flow both ways and, whichever way they're moving, they rarely have open parking spots.

Back to the past

Retirees who returned to Ann Arbor said they weren't hoping to find a fountain of youth. They're not chasing nostalgia.

But that doesn't prevent them from bumping into a memory once in a while.

In 1950, Rowe, the Commons resident who was gone from Ann Arbor for 30 years, was a U-M freshman sitting in German class when she met the man she would marry. He later taught at the school while she worked on her doctorate and raised two children.

"In a sense, we're going back to the past," Rowe said.

The retirees don't want to be tethered to lawn chairs in screened-in garages, watching the world pass by. They'd rather talk about current events, not their latest infirmity.

They stay young, not by living among students, but by engaging their minds.

They may be too old to go to bonfires, but the spirit of learning still flickers inside.

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